

# PRIESTESSES AND PATRIARCHY

From the late eighth century B.C. until 200s A.D., Greek authors employed priestesses as examples of acceptable women when they supported the patriarchal status quo.

Priestesses loyally supported their families, especially their male relations; were expected to adhere to strict standards of decorum, which embodied Greek male preoccupation with:

- visible *aidos*
- manly *arete*
- being the best, *aristos*



Women protected their families from danger.

- The archetypal priestess and model for Greek girls, Theano, keeper of her family’s unity even at the expense of her ego (*Iliad*, 5.70; 11.224)
- Iphigenia, Orestes’s liberator even at the expense of her life (*Iphigenia among the Taurians*, 1004)
- Zakoros Charicleia, Theagenes’s deliverer from the Egyptian buccaneers (*An Ethiopian Romance*, 4, 46, 49) and from “the cruel necessity” of human sacrifice in Meroe (271); his royal wife in Ethiopia (277)

“It is not easy for us to go through with the impossible.”  
(*Iphigenia in Aulis*, 1369)

They were acclaimed for their:

- rhetorical skills
- erudition
- self-confidence (when priestesses supported men)



Women were agents of healing, learning, prophecy, and reconciliation.

- The Pythia, speaker in hexameter, domesticated Orestes’s Furies (*Eumenides*, 1-30)
- Another Pythia, forecaster in grand style of Charicleia and Theagenes’s happy ending in Meroe (*An Ethiopian Romance*, 66, 277)
- Powerful Delphian oracle, prognosticator of defeat of Persians by Athenians (*Histories*, 8.34-39)
- Charicleia, champion of “versatile eloquence” (*An Ethiopian Romance*, 63)
- Iphigenia, magniloquent elocutionist (*Iphigenia in Aulis*, 1378-1379)
- Lysistrata, persuasive arbiter of peace and reconciliation (*Lysistrata*, 203, 574, 1114)

# THE DAILY LIVES OF ANCIENT GREEK PRIESTESSES

Priestesses were praised for patriotic support of their *polis*:

- in war
- in peace
- were more efficient than men



Women acted as cult agents within the religious *and* the political Greek system.

- Lysistrata, personification of historical Lysimache, war-breaker and peace-bringer to the polis (*Lysistrata*, 586, 1156)
- Iphigenia, metaphorical destroyer of Troy (*Iphigenia in Aulis*, 1473)
- Theano, intermediary for peace with Greeks and gods (*Iliad*, 6.350-359)
- The Pythia, seer of new Greek colonies, including Cyrene in Libya (*Histories*, 4.155-167)
- The Pythia, judge of the Lemnians in favor of Athenians (*Histories*, 6.139)

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The Homeric key, also called the Key of Penelope, an attribute of Greek priestesses.

Priestesses were condemned when they:

- had to act in self-defense
- did not follow the rules
- behaved in a corrupted manner



Priestesses’ fate was often determined by men.

- Iphigenia forced to participate in preparing victims for human sacrifice by King Thoas and priests of Artemis (*Iphigenia among the Taurians*, 30-42)
- The Pythia at Delphi selected from local peasantry by priests; if married, she had to leave her husband permanently; often mistreated by brash male petitioners (*Portrait of a Priestess*, 72-74; 78)
- Charicleia’s evasion of the capital punishment used as a determinant of Delphian Games laws change (*An Ethiopian Romance*, 90-91)
- Corrupted Pythia, when discovered, outlawed; the wealth from the bribes stayed at the shrine, adding to its splendor (*Histories*, 6.63-67; *Portrait of a Priestess*, 75)